

Subconscious mental connection between blacks, apes may reinforce subtle discrimination

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Many U.S. citizens may not hold openly racist beliefs today, but they still may subconsciously link African Americans with apes because people still use words and metaphors that subtly reinforce a less-than-human bias and endorse violence against Blacks, according to a new study.

"Historical racist images and books dehumanizing African Americans in the 19th and early 20th century relied heavily on the Negro-ape metaphor, which was used to stereotype Blacks as lazy, dim and aggressive," said lead author Phillip Atiba Goff, assistant professor of psychology at Penn State. "Such dehumanization and animal imagery have been used for centuries to justify violence against many oppressed groups.

"The images have disappeared from popular culture and from most people's memory," he added. "However, after completing six studies, we found strong evidence that Black-ape linkages still influence people subconsciously and impact their judgment particularly in the case of African American suspects and defendants."

The study's findings are published in the paper, "Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization and Contemporary Consequences," in a recent issue (February) of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, which is published by the American Psychological Association.

Goff and fellow researchers Jennifer Eberhardt, associate professor of psychology at Stanford University; Matthew C. Jackson and Melissa J. Williams, graduate students at Penn State and Berkeley, respectively, conducted six studies of college-age students. They found that participants – even those with no stated prejudices or knowledge of the historical images – were quicker to associate Blacks with apes than they were to associate Whites with apes.

Goff and fellow researchers Jennifer Eberhardt, associate professor of psychology at Stanford University, Matthew C. Jackson and Melissa J. Williams, graduate students at Penn State and Berkeley, respectively, conducted six studies of White college-age students. They found that participants – even those with no stated prejudices or knowledge of the historical images -- were quicker to associate Blacks with apes than they were to associate Whites with apes.

In the first three studies, researchers subliminally flashed Black or White male faces on a screen for a fraction of a second to "prime" the participants, who could identify blurry ape drawings much faster after they were primed with Black faces than with White faces.

The connection was made only with African American faces; the third study failed to find an ape association with other non-White groups, such as Asians.

The fourth study showed that the implicit linkage can be subconscious for participants. In the fifth study, the researchers subliminally primed 115 White men with words associated with either apes (such as "monkey," "chimp," "gorilla") or big cats (such as "lion," "tiger," "cheetah"). Apes and big cats are associated with violence and Africa.

The subjects then watched a two-minute video clip, depicting several police officers violently beating a man of undetermined race. A photo of

either a White or a Black man was shown at the beginning of the clip to indicate who was being beaten, with a description conveying that, although described by his family as "a loving husband and father," the suspect had a serious criminal record and may have been high on drugs at the time of his arrest.

The students were then asked to rate how justified the beating was. Participants who believed the suspect was White were no more likely to condone the beating when they were primed with either ape or big cat words. But those who thought the suspect was Black were more likely to justify the beating if they had been primed with ape words than with big cat words.

The sixth study showed that in hundreds of news stories from 1979 to 1999 in the Philadelphia Inquirer, African Americans convicted of capital crimes were about four times more likely than Whites convicted of capital crimes to be described with ape-relevant language, such as "barbaric," "beast," "brute," "savage" and "wild."

"While the explicit images of Blacks as apes have disappeared from the U.S. media, the images still may continue in coded language," the researchers said in the study. "Perhaps subtle metaphors that go largely unnoticed in the media continue to have great effect – and even be linked to life-and-death decisions."

As recently as the early 1990s, California state police euphemistically referred to cases involving young Black men as N.H.I. – No Humans Involved, according to the study. A police officer involved in the 1991 Rodney King beating had just come from a domestic dispute with a Black couple and referred to it as "something right out of (the movie) Gorillas in the Mist."

" If you look at some political cartoons of Condoleezza Rice, Barack

Obama and Colin Powell, you see that they are represented in ape-like caricature," noted Goff "It is not explicit depiction and therefore not seen as offensive.

"But not seeing Blacks as humans leads to implicit – or subconscious – bias, leading to support of stereotyping and other forms of discrimination again African Americans," he said. "Old-fashioned prejudice involves deliberate action and beliefs. By studying implicit knowledge and how it functions, we can study the mechanisms in hopes of remedying dehumanization's savage consequences."

Source: Penn State

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